

**College Quarterly**Summer 2009 - Volume 12 Number 3

[▲ Home](#)[◀ Contents](#)**Faculty Attitudes and Perceptions Toward College Students with Disabilities***by Barbara S. S. Hong and Joy Himmel***Abstract**

Faculty attitudes can impact the effectiveness of the accommodations students with disabilities receive and subsequently, their success in higher education. This study examined variables concerning faculty perceptions of (1) personal time constraint, (2) performance expectations of students with disabilities, (3) believability of students' disabilities, (4) willingness to accommodate, and (5) general knowledge of campus disability resources and legislation. Knowledge was found to be the precondition for whether or not faculty will have a positive experience working with students with disabilities. Recommendations for promoting faculty awareness of disability issues and related professional development in pedagogical best practices for non-traditional learners are addressed.

As more students with disabilities successfully complete their elementary and secondary education due largely to federal mandates such as the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 (P.L. 105-17), the number transitioning into higher education has also increased steadily (Frieden, 2003). The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) reported that the number of undergraduates who revealed they have a disability has tripled over the past 20 years, from 3 to 10 percent (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). In the last 12 years alone, students labeled with a learning disability have risen from 16% to 40% (Henderson, 2001).

Attending college is an exciting threshold for many people, but a particularly tense experience for many students with disabilities. As these youths make the transition into college, they are entering an environment that is fundamentally different from that of their K-12 setting. Classes in college are more demanding, reading is more complex, social-interaction is more sophisticated, and assistance is not always readily available. At the same time, contact with instructors is less frequent, advising is less personal, and instruction is less individualized.

Unlike K-12 public education where students with disabilities are governed by law under IDEA (2004), higher education has no such structure or guarantee except the nondiscriminatory provisions found in American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requiring "appropriate academic

adjustments” for eligible students (see Appendix A for an explanation of these mandates and examples of academic adjustments). Consequently, the burden of obtaining accommodations rests on the skills and knowledge of individual students to navigate the process.

Unquestionably, in the last decade, there has been greater access to higher education for students with disabilities; however, this has not translated into greater success for these individuals (Stodden & Conway, 2003). Paradoxically, some researchers have argued that postsecondary institutions provide accommodations at a much higher rate than secondary schools (Sharpe, Johnson, Izzo, & Murray, 2005). Nonetheless, the outcome of students has not been parallel. Reports on outcomes revealed that of the 73% of students with disabilities who enrolled in college, only a meager 28% received their diplomas compared to 54% of non-disabled peers (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). In short, students with disabilities who cannot meet the expectations and challenges which higher education entails are still more likely to drop-out than any other groups of students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998; National Organization on Disabilities, 1998; Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002). Perhaps a pressing question to ask would be: “What other factors could impact students with disabilities or influence the effectiveness of the accommodations they receive?”

A multitude of studies have identified faculty attitudes as the key contributor to the success of students with disabilities (e.g., Askamit, Morris, & Leunberger 1987; Baggett, 1994; Fichten, 1988; Ibrahim & Herr, 1982; Katz, Hass, & Bailey, 1988; Matthews, Anderson, & Skolnick, 1987; Minner & Prater, 1984; Rao, 2004; Scott & Gregg, 2000; Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999; Wolanin & Steele, 2004). In a study conducted by Ibrahim and Herr (1982), they found that as faculty became more familiar with information related to disabilities, their negative stereotyping attitudes began to decrease and their perceptions of people with disabilities started to be more positive.

Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) studied how the reactions of faculty towards students’ requests for accommodation affected students’ decisions to seek future assistance. Their investigation revealed that students were more reluctant to seek help once they had a negative experience with the faculty. On the other hand, if students had a positive reaction from faculty the first time they approached them, they were more likely to ask for help again in the future. This, and other studies (e.g., Farone, Hall, & Costello, 1998; Houck, Asselin, Troutman, & Arrington, 1992; Matthews et al., 1987; Nelson, Dodd, & Smith, 1990), suggest that the attitudes of faculty towards students with disabilities play a crucial role in influencing students’ willingness to obtain help early, and thus preventing premature drop-out.

Chubon (1992) maintained that the objective in studying faculty attitudes is to enable institutions to develop ways for changing

negative attitudes that are detrimental to student success. This study aimed to understand the attitudes of faculty towards accommodating students with disabilities in relation to their perceptions of (1) personal time constraint, (2) performance expectations of students with disabilities, (3) believability of students' disabilities, (4) willingness to accommodate, and (5) general knowledge of campus disability resources and legislation. We believe it is important to examine these variables in order to understand how faculty attitudes impact the effectiveness of the accommodations students with disabilities receive.

Method

The study was conducted in a small suburban public institution located in the East Coast of the United States. The enrollment during the time of the study was 4,300 students. Of that population, 225 students (5.2%) were receiving support services for disability from the Health and Wellness center. The greatest number of students was identified in the category of learning disabilities ($n = 29$), followed by attention deficit disorder ($n = 13$) and mental health ($n = 16$). There were approximately 292 faculty teaching courses in the institution at the time of the study. 95 were on tenure-track (33%), 59 were on fixed-term (20%), and 138 were considered part-time (47%).

Instrumentation

Since there was no suitable scale for measuring the combined constructs for this study, we designed an instrument based on past relevant scales and review of literatures about faculty knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to students with disabilities. We evaluated the content validity of the instrument by seeking the expertise of the following 10 individuals to review the instrument: two directors of disability services (one from a different institution), four faculty (two from different institutions), three administrators (two from different institutions), and one faculty in psychology (from the institution). We incorporated all the suggestions and ensured that each item was clearly worded and had a high face validity and content validity. No specific disabilities were identified because, as mandated by law, college students do not need to disclose their disabilities to faculty when requesting accommodations. We want explicitly to examine the attitudes of faculty towards students with disabilities, regardless of the types, conspicuity, or severity of the disability. The final instrument is called Perceptions of College Students with Disabilities (PCSD).

There were two sections to the survey. Section I gathered demographic information and asked respondents to rate on a scale of 1-5 their level of experience in working with students with disabilities. One written comment in this section asked respondents to indicate examples of accommodations in higher education without using any search engines. These comments were later typed and used to supplement analysis of faculty knowledge about disability resources

and legislation in higher education setting.

Section II of the survey used a simple 5-point Likert type scale (1= "Not True At All" to 5= "Very True") to respond to 35 questions. We divided the items into five constructs, which were (a) knowledge of disability resources and legislation; (b) willingness to accommodate; (c) perceptions of accommodating students with disabilities as a matter of time constraint; (d) performance expectations of students who have a disability; and (e) believability of students when they request an accommodation. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to provide written comments and examples concerning whether they felt certain types of disabilities should not be enrolled in their classes and whether students with disabilities should be excluded from or denied admission to certain majors.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

We conducted a factor analysis to examine the structure of the instrument using an oblique rotation (promax) (Gorsuch, 1983). Results showed that all 35 items had the recommended .40 communalities and factor loading ranging between .801 and .567. Hence, there was no need to remove any item from the scale. The final scale has 11 factors, accounting for 52.4% of the variance. All factors had Eigenvalues greater than 1, and the scree plot showed an appropriate factor structure. The Scale was weighted for its internal consistency and cohesiveness and received a Cronbach coefficient alpha for .65 when computed with 116 participants for all 35 items. This lower alpha level is typical for instruments measuring self-reported perceptions and beliefs.

Procedures

We distributed a total of 275 surveys in the spring academic term to all part- and full-time faculty who were teaching that semester. The survey was distributed throughout campus via inter-office mail. Faculty who did not have mailboxes or were on leave did not receive the survey. This explains the discrepancy between the total number of faculty teaching courses during the spring semester (N = 292) and the actual number of surveys delivered. In the end, we received 116 surveys back, giving us a returned rate of 42%. The cover letter included in each survey packet clearly stated the purpose of the study and assured faculty of their anonymity. The data were entered into an SPSS database. We checked data for consistency by randomly selecting surveys and comparing the responses to the data entered.

Results

Not all the 116 returned surveys were completely filled out, thus resulting in minimal differences in the total responses analyzed for each of the 35 items. Missing data were treated consistently during the analysis using SPSS. Results showed they had a negligible impact on the findings. Table 1 illustrates the frequencies and

descriptive statistics of the following items.

Table 1

Respondents were 63 (54.3%) full-time and 51 (44.0%) part-time (2 respondents did not indicate status of employment), 57 (49.1%) of whom were male and 58 (50%) were female (1 respondent did not indicate gender). A majority of the respondents taught between 51-100 students each semester (44%, $n = 50$). Seventy-three (62.9%) faculty said they have taught in higher education settings for more than eight years. On average, respondents indicated that they have a mean of 1.86 ($SD = 1.69$) students with disabilities who requested accommodations in the past year. The group mean for faculty who identified themselves as experienced in teaching students with disabilities was 3.09, indicating moderately experienced, with a variance of 1.23 and a standard deviation of 1.11.

Between group comparisons. To explore potential differences between groups, we conducted one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests to calculate each independent variable by (a) gender, (b) years of experience in higher education, (c) status of employment, (d) number of students taught each semester, and (e) experience in working with students with disabilities.

No significant difference was found between male and female respondents or the number of years teaching in a higher education setting for all factors at $p < .05$. In terms of employment status, the analysis revealed significant difference between full- and part-time faculty for the factor of knowledge, $F(2, 114) = 4.21, p < .05$. No significant difference was found for the number of students faculty taught each semester. However, an analysis of variance of faculty experience with students with disabilities yielded significant difference between groups in regard to knowledge ($F(5, 115) = 7.71, p < .001$) and believability ($F(5, 114) = 3.14, p < .01$). Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of these ANOVAs.

Table 2

Factor correlations. An analysis of bivariate correlation showed that knowledge was negatively correlated with perceptions of time constraints ($r = -.29, p < .01$), performance expectations ($r = -.18, p < .05$), and believability of students ($r = -.29, p < .01$). This correlation implied that the more faculty indicated they have knowledge of disability, the less likely they were to perceive helping students with disabilities as a time constraint, less likely to lower expectations, and less likely to doubt students who have a verified disability. Table 3 shows the Pearson correlations using one-tailed probabilities procedure. On the other hand, knowledge was positively and significantly associated with willingness to accommodate ($r = .43, p < .01$). This correlation implied that the more faculty indicated they were knowledgeable about disability, the more willing they were to accommodate students with disabilities. Keep in mind that this study

was not intended to measure the accuracy of faculty knowledge of disability resources or legislation, but rather to examine how faculty perceived their own level of understanding about disabilities and how that perception potentially influenced their attitudes towards students with disabilities.

Table 3

Regression analysis. A regression analysis was conducted using “willingness to accommodate” as the dependent variable and time constraints, knowledge, performance expectations, and believability as the independent variables. Results indicated that knowledge ($p < .001$) and perception of time constraints ($p < .01$) were the best predictors of whether or not faculty were willing to accommodate. No other significance was found.

Summary. To summarize the findings with respect to each question, we grouped the responses of “Very True” and “True” together as “Positive” and the responses of “Not True At All” and “Not True” as “Negative.” Scores were reversed where necessary to reflect “positive” or “negative” attitude. The percentages and number of responses were rounded up in order to simplify reporting.

Faculty knowledge ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .71$). Nearly 45% ($n = 51$) gave positive responses compared to 27% ($n = 31$) who gave negative responses and another 28% ($n = 33$) who reported neutral on these questions. About 27% ($n = 31$) of faculty did not think they have adequate skills in working with students who may have disabilities compared to 57% ($n = 65$) who believed they do and another 27% ($n = 31$) who selected neutral on this question. Table 4 presents the self-reported level of faculty knowledge.

Table 4

Faculty willingness ($M = 3.99$, $SD = .65$). About 75% ($n = 85$) of faculty responded positively to questions pertaining to willingness, while 11% ($n = 13$) indicated otherwise, and another 14% ($n = 16$) were neutral. Overall, four out of five respondents reported that they had had positive experiences in working with students with disabilities compared to only 5% ($n = 6$) who did not. Table 5 summarizes their responses.

Table 5

Time constraint ($M = 2.09$, $SD = .67$). The lower scores for these questions actually indicated more “positivity,” whereas the higher scores represented more “negativity.” Accordingly, the scores on questions 19 and 20 were reversed. When asked how faculty perceived accommodating students with disabilities as a matter of time constraint, 66% ($n = 75$) gave positive responses, while 14% ($n = 15$) gave negative responses and another 20% ($n = 23$) were neutral. Overall, 44% ($n = 49$) did not perceive accommodating students with

disabilities as demanding more of their time, compared to 22% (n = 25) who believed otherwise. Table 6 shows the summary of their responses.

Table 6

Performance expectation (M = 2.03, SD = .68). Higher scores on these questions were indicative of greater negativity, and, inversely, lower scores were indicative of greater positivity. When asked about expectations regarding the performance of students with disabilities, almost 69% (n = 78) of the faculty responded positively, compared to 18% (n = 20) who did not and another 13% (n = 15) who responded neutrally. A majority (95%, n = 108) believed students with disabilities would do well and be successful in college. Table 7 is a summary of these responses.

Table 7

Faculty believability (M = 1.77, SD = .69). Here, faculty were asked whether or not they believed a student has a verified disability under different contexts and how that attitude affected the way they treated these students. Again, the scores were inversed to reflect positivity and negativity accordingly. Almost 79% (n = 90) of faculty responded positively regarding believing students who have a verified disability, compared to 9% (n = 10) who responded negatively. Another 12% (n = 14) responded neutrally. Table 8 is a summary of these responses.

Table 8

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of faculty regarding their own perceived attitudes about college students with disabilities and how their perceptions influenced their practices towards these students. Overall, our findings suggest that faculty perceived themselves as generally knowledgeable about disability resources and have rather positive perceptions about students with disabilities. However, only 1 out of 5 faculty said they were familiar with disabilities legislation such as ADA or Section 504 as they relate to higher education. The good news is that faculty were willing to look up information or talk to someone about the issues with which they were unfamiliar. Similarly, faculty did not think they would lower their expectations just because a student has a disability or doubt a student's disclosure of his or her disability for any reason.

These findings are important because apparently, the faculty's lack of specific knowledge about disability legislation did not inhibit their willingness to work with students with disabilities or negatively shape their attitude towards them. This is heartening to know because institutional service providers and administrations can streamline their attention towards improving communication and disseminating

information to faculty about resources and disability legislation without having to dwell on changing their attitudes. After all, knowledge was found to be a significant predictor of faculty willingness to accommodate. This finding is consistent with previous studies done by Benham (1995), McGee (1989) and Rao (2002).

By and large, faculty said they had positive experiences in working with students with disabilities. Faculty did not perceive helping students as a time constraint or as a matter of intruding into their academic autonomy. In fact, a large majority indicated that they would not only follow through with the request for accommodation, but would also make the initial contact with the students, arrange for special office hours, and even go the extra mile to arrange additional help for them. These findings are consistent with previous research about faculty willingness to support students with disabilities in any way possible (Houck et al., 1992).

Our group comparisons revealed no significant difference between gender for all factors. This finding is consistent with studies conducted by McGee (1989), Vogel et al. (1999), and Williamson (2000), but contrary to reports by Benham (1995), Kleinsasser (1999), and Murray, Wren, and Keys (2008). Further investigation into the relationship between gender and attitudes would be beneficial for the institution on a case-by-case basis. Our analysis of the number of students faculty taught each semester did not show any significant difference.

Finally, our analysis of status of employment suggested that full-time faculty were more knowledgeable and more willing to accommodate than part-time faculty. Also, a greater number of full-time faculty reported they were more experienced and have more positive attitudes in working with students with disabilities than part-time faculty. This is consistent with previous findings by Askamit et al., (1987), Benham (1995), and Rao (2002). To some degree, these findings could be interpreted as troubling because, just like many small-size institutions, almost half of all of the institution's courses are taught by part-time faculty. As McCarthy and Campbell (1993) stated, attitudes toward people with disabilities are associated with the degree of direct contact individuals have had with people with disabilities. Therefore, future research into the relationship between faculty exposure to students with disabilities and faculty willingness to accommodate would help shed light on this area. Also, the impact part-time faculty could have on students with disabilities needs further investigation. At the same time, administrators need to pay more attention to how they can reach out to part-time faculty and expose them to disability resources.

The mailed survey for this study was designed not only to solicit information from faculty, but also as a research intervention for faculty to become more cognizant of their own attitudes towards students with disabilities. Even the written comments were designed to allow faculty to examine their own practices and beliefs about whether or

not they think students with certain disabilities should be enrolled in their classes or be admitted to a particular major. Simply by asking questions directly related to their attitudes and interpretations of events and people, we hope to arouse some reflective moments for faculty in understanding where they stand when it comes to the whole notion of college students with special needs.

The intent of this study should not be undervalued because there is general consensus that typical faculty in higher education are untrained as teachers and/or lack a repertoire of techniques in teaching traditional or non-traditional learners (Banta, 2007). Admittedly, many do not even have the foundational knowledge of pedagogies for teaching traditional students, let alone students with different learning needs. Even though faculty in this study were able to identify examples of accommodations and academic adjustments, we do not know to what extent faculty know how to adapt or employ universally designed approaches for reaching students with diverse needs. Further investigations into the understanding of how faculty adapt and methods of adaptations would be very insightful.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that faculty who completed the survey were comfortable enough to reveal their own latent or identified disabilities. For example, one respondent reported that he used to be identified as having attention deficit disorder and therefore understands how his students feel. Another revealed that her partial blindness allowed her to empathize when she had a student who was blind and needed accommodation.

At first glance, the general response from faculty about students with disabilities appeared to be rather positive. Upon further reflection, we were concerned that almost half of the faculty did not participate in this survey (58%, N =159). Our findings lent themselves to more positive responses because we assumed that faculty who chose to participate were more interested in issues pertaining to college students with disabilities than those who chose not to participate. We were also concerned about the number of faculty who indicated "Neutral" on questions pertaining to knowledge. Almost one in every three faculty were not sure where they stood when it came to making an effort to learn about available resources, how to make adaptations, being aware of teaching materials, aids, technology for people with disabilities, and having adequate skills to work with students with disabilities. It is our belief that if faculty were truly supportive of and willing to accommodate students with disabilities, perhaps they would also want to be more familiar with the relevant services, legislation, resources, and pedagogies.

In light of these findings, administrators and service providers can examine ways to enhance faculty accessibility to this information by developing strategies for increasing faculty awareness of best practices in pedagogies related to working with students with special needs. It seems fair to conclude that faculty knowledge is still the

most critical precondition for whether or not faculty will have a positive or negative experience with college students with disabilities. Likewise, it is fair to say that the limited knowledge of faculty about disabilities may have potential detrimental effects on students with disabilities.

Limitations

As with all self-reporting about attitudes, the outcomes of interest cannot be measured accurately because respondents are not always able to provide precise judgment to a question due to their lack of experience; in addition, they may be unwilling to provide truthful information (Aaker, Jumar, & Day, 1998; Wentland & Smith, 1993). Research shows that people often do not respond accurately when asked about sensitive areas or put in uncomfortable or potentially embarrassing positions as was the case with this study (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988). In addition, the time frame being examined can also be a potential problem in self-recollection (Gershuny & Robinson, 1988). This problem was ameliorated by asking respondents to recall more recent activities (less than a year ago), thus providing a frame of reference to be considered that did not delve too much into recounting their past feelings, attitudes, and experiences.

Moreover, when it comes to self-reporting, there is a tendency for respondents to inflate slightly certain aspects of their own evaluation of situations or behavior known as the "halo effect" (Pike, 1999). While the absolute value of what respondents report might differ somewhat from how they actually feel, the effect is somewhat consistent across faculty. Consequently, this reduced the probability that one faculty is under- or –over-estimating his or her own attitudes.

Several other limitations need to be considered as well. First, a substantial number of faculty did not respond to the survey; consequently, we really do not know the attitudes of these non-respondents. Second, the sample was drawn from one small institution, and, as a result, the conclusions cannot be generalized. Third, even though this study involved correlational data, it does not offer evidence of causality. Fourth, disability was not confined to any specific types or degrees of severity, so respondents may have a more heterogeneous understanding of disability based on their own experiences. Finally, faculty may have responded more positively to this survey because it is deemed more "socially desirable" to support people with disabilities than not to support them.

With these considerations, this study is still valid (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988; Brandt, 1958; Converse & Presser, 1989; Lowman & Williams, 1987). One, the report asked respondents to report information that is known to them; (2) the questions are phrased clearly and validated by 10 expert reviewers; (3) the questions referred to recent experiences (one year or one semester); (4) the faculty who responded think the survey merits a serious and

thoughtful response; and (5) the questions did not embarrass, threaten, or violate the privacy of faculty. For these reasons, the findings are worth considering for the purpose intended.

Implications for Practice

This study supports the large amount of research that shows that faculty in any size institutions want to support students with disabilities despite their lack of knowledge about specific mandated legislation requirements. This study should be replicated to examine any potential disparities between academic units or disciplines and faculty attitudes about accommodations. Based on these findings, we hope institutions will seek ways to involve faculty in disability programs interventions, policy making, and services enhancements in order to expose both full- and part-time faculty to knowledge of disability issues.

Furthermore, we need to discover which communication medium works most effectively in disseminating information. Do print catalogs, emails, workshops, mailbox, announcements, newsletters work best? What is the best level of dissemination—department, college, or institution? And if faculty do not respond enthusiastically, does it mean they are not interested and that service providers should stop disseminating this information? Or should an institution or institutions continue to publicize existing resources and create a network of collegiality that allows faculty to have the opportunity to ask questions via round table discussions? This can occur not only at the institutional level, but also at the departmental or division level, where faculty are more acquainted with each other to dialogue openly about issues pertaining to their programs and their students.

In addition, it is important to build on junior faculty who are working with students with disabilities in higher education for the first time. Pedagogical best practices can always benefit both junior and senior faculty, as well as students with or without disabilities.

Changing faculty attitudes is a difficult, but not impossible task. Because faculty members have more affinity to their own profession and discipline, their identities are often separated from the institutional mission (Hardy, 1991). Faculty seldom see a need to be involved in issues pertaining to disabilities or even get acquainted with the disability service center unless and until there is a need associated with their professional capacity or a course they teach.

Even though research has demonstrated the pivotal role faculty play in the success of students with and without disabilities, this task has proven to be more arduous and challenging for many. In discussing the role of faculty, M. Walker made this observation almost 29 years ago, "Support services can make it possible for the handicapped student to enter the postsecondary setting physically but only faculty can provide access to knowledge and ways of knowing" (Walker, 1980, p. 54). To effect real change, training must

be offered at all levels, not only to faculty, but to staff and administrators as well. The object here is to help faculty members understand the impact they have on the lives of students with disabilities. Hence, essential components of multi-layer, multi-planning, and multi-modal approaches may be more influential.

Appendix A

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